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In Memoriam: Arthur Allen Leff

Robert M. Cover[†]

My daughter, who has known Arthur Leff all of her five years, said it best. "I was just getting to know him." She, like the rest of us, had been busy discovering so much of herself and of the world—especially the human world—in her play with Arthur Leff. For all of us that play has been brutally interrupted.

Play was serious stuff for Arthur and fun too. Young children were to be taken seriously (and they were fun, too). So were students at the Yale Law School and the colleagues on its faculty. To each, Arthur Leff brought his unique capacity to take another person seriously and to make the play fun. He was a very serious man with a marvelous capacity for humor. Because he took others so seriously that gift of humor was never mean. Occasionally barbed, it was most likely to be sharp when pointed at God, the universe, humankind in general. It was most likely to be gentle, coaxing, when it was about a particular person, near at hand.

Not every successful classroom performer is a great Teacher—a master not only of a subject, but also of a way of living through or with the subject. Arthur Leff was such a master whether he taught with colleagues in the faculty lounge, with students in his office or in the classroom, with friends and family in the kitchen. The way he taught and lived was one of decency, honesty, respect. These were qualities he never expected from the Cosmos or from God; he never ceased to cultivate them in himself and in the people around him.

Arthur's work as a scholar will live, as the work of scholars lives on, in deathless debate about great issues. His work as a person lives as well in the seeds of decency so gently planted in us all by this least self-righteous but most righteous of men.

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